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ABSTRACT

As school populations decline and costs rise due to inflation, rural and small schools are turning to shared services in order to keep community schools open, meet federal mandates, and improve educational opportunities. Sharing ventures may be for limited purposes, such as sharing a physics teacher or having a joint drama production, or for more permanent programs such as a regional vocational education or media center. Guidelines for successful service sharing programs include joint planning by participating districts, clearly written objectives, voluntary participation, and equitable cost sharing. At the regional level, financing and staff recruitment are typical problems facing service sharing agencies. Among school districts, problems are related to issues such as school calendars, scheduling, transportation, teacher benefits, and local pride. Shared ventures can expand curriculum offerings, maintain a balanced staff, and decrease expenditures through joint purchasing and sharing of supplies, equipment, and staff salaries. A list of eight references available from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service is appended. (JHZ)

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SHARED SERVICES FOR RURAL AND SMALL SCHOOLS

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ERIC/CRESS, Summer 1983

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RURAL EDUCATION DIGEST

1984

Shared Services for Rural and Small Schools

What does shared services mean?

Shared services means that individual school districts reach out beyond themselves to maintain or enhance their educational position. The resulting provision of services may be known by a variety of names: cooperatives, leagues, consortiums, collaboratives, or pairings. The aim of sharing services is to provide pooled resources without overemphasizing regulatory functions.

Why are school districts exploring the shared service concept?

School revenues based on enrollments are not adequate as school populations decline and costs rise due to inflation. To improve educational opportunities, meet federal mandates and keep schools open, small districts have had to seek alternatives. Through shared services, a comprehensive educational program can be offered even though the school is not comprehensive. Sharing allows small communities to keep their schools and, in the case of high schools, their identity and vitality.

Which sharing strategies have been explored?

Most contact in the past between rural and small schools has been through athletic competition. Now these schools are promoting academic cooperation.

Teachers have taken itinerant positions, students have been bused to single locations, equipment and texts have been rotated, and two-way tele-communications have brought teachers and students of different districts together.

In exploring ways for two rural school districts to share services, 84 strategies were listed on a survey. The following is a much shorter list of possibilities:

Instructional materials	Equipment
Teachers	Administrators
Support personnel	Curriculum development
Courses	Staff development
Inservicing	Purchasing
Counseling Services	Community services
Board development	Planning
Instructional television	Transportation
Media centers	Community colleges
Vocational education centers	Special Education
Testing	Financial management
Federal programs	Athletics

Sharing ventures may be for limited purposes, such as sharing a physics teacher or having a joint drama production, or for more permanent programs such as a regional vocational education center. They can encompass large program areas that provide a variety of services and programs.

How do school districts initiate a sharing relationship?

The following guidelines are suggested for increasing the probability of success:

- joint planning and development
- clearly written agreements
- voluntary participation — always able to withdraw, but with enough lead time so that nobody gets left in the lurch
- equitable cost sharing — each might kick in an amount based on total district enrollment or dollars per student enrolled in the program, swap teacher services or use of facilities
- program review
- a designated individual responsible for managing the program, coordinating the planning, etc.
- joint evaluation
- willingness to take a chance
- promotion of programs within participating schools

It is important to focus on the future of the school district in the planning stages. Enrollment and revenue projections along with the costs and benefits of the alternates are important figures to be presented at public hearings for community members. The educational program should be reviewed along with the social and economic impact the school district has on the community. It is important to have community support of the respective district boards.

What mechanisms are used to maintain shared services' relationships/organizations?

Where pairing occurs, the two school boards usually act as the governing board. With the involvement of more school districts, a representative board member from each participating school district may be elected or appointed to the governing board.

As the cooperative relationship becomes more formal and provides a variety of services, the board of directors may be elected from a broader community base. Advisory committees may also exist. It is important to involve local board and community members, teachers, and administrators regularly to develop cooperation.

The coordinator must possess good leadership skills. Along with any administrative staff, this person must implement what each small district by itself cannot offer and thus avoid the bitterness of forced reorganization.

Evaluation of programs and procedures should be built into the organization's goals.

Over 30 states now provide some kind of sharing arrangements. One benefit of a regional organization is that it eliminates the need for a district to seek a partner each time a specific need for sharing occurs.

Are there sharing ventures which can be conducted outside of school systems?

High school course offerings can be expanded by utilizing community colleges, universities, correspondence study, and televised college courses.

Community colleges have the potential for providing vocational education or advanced courses for which there is no qualified high school faculty or for which few students are interested.

Correspondence and televised college courses can be monitored by teachers as independent student study projects.

Community agencies and businesses can be explored for possible educational partnerships.

What are some problems associated with shared services?

Some specific problems occur at different levels of a cooperative relationship.

At the regional educational agency level, finances may be a problem. Partially funded by state and district user fees, the Regional Education Agency (REA) may have to search for alternate funding sources. Distances which staff must travel to remote schools to deliver services may be a contributing factor to attracting and keeping staff.

As cooperating agencies provide more and more direct services, Local Education Agencies (LEAS) may feel undermined.

Other problems to overcome are differences among school districts caused by:

- School calendars
- Scheduling
- Length of periods
- Course accountability
- Transportation
- Mistrust
- Teacher contracts
- Teacher benefits and salaries
- Teacher travel time during instructional day
- Local pride
- Traditional territorial boundaries

What are some of the advantages of shared ventures?

Program offerings in small schools can be maintained and often expanded in the areas of vocational education, foreign languages, fine arts, mathematics, and science.

At the faculty level a balanced staff can be maintained. Academic expertise and support can increase between districts.

Organizational services at the management level can be shared and federal mandates more easily met.

Procedures can be improved as the result of sharing policy development among school districts.

Transportation facilities can be shared.

Expenditures can be decreased through joint purchasing, sharing of text books, supplies, equipment, and teachers' salaries.

Community cooperation and support increases with the development of common policies, calendars, and schedules.

Local communities support cooperative involvement because students are the focus of the endeavor.

Successful examples of shared services:

Vocational education in a van provides 9-week courses by traveling to several rural South Dakota districts.

Seven districts in Connecticut have a shared-services arrangement which includes the superintendent, director of instruction, federal programs and special education directors, and a legal agent.

Funds from the Appalachian Regional Development Act provide eight school systems with health programs, screening of second and seventh graders, school campus safety inspections, and CPR training for students and teachers.

In California a small school district which could no longer afford maintenance costs contracted with the neighboring school district for transportation services.

Eight districts in central Alaska with Athabascan Indian student populations formed a consortium which applied for funds to develop an Athabascan social studies curriculum.

A community college in Iowa offers one-half day courses in office practice, health aide, engines, construction, and voactional agriculture to high school students from a 9-school cooperative. Monthly meetings are held by the governing body of superintendents and personnel from the college.

Pairing between two rural school districts in Minnesota has one school district instructing grades K-3 and 7-9 while the other has grades 4-6 and 10-12. Some teachers travel between schools and all activities are paired. Decisions are made at joint school board meetings, however, the school districts have remained separate governmental units.

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